

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 353

CG 029 926

AUTHOR Hwang, Philip O.
TITLE Self-Esteem or Self-Delusion?
PUB DATE 1997-05-00
NOTE 7p.; In: Caring in an Age of Technology. Proceedings of the International Conference on Counseling in the 21st Century (6th, Beijing, China, May 29-30, 1997); see CG 029 879.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Change; Behavior Change; Responsibility; *Self Esteem; Social Values; *Values Clarification

ABSTRACT

This paper states that programs to raise self esteem have not proved effective, and an increase in self esteem has not been shown to improve academic achievement. It suggests that the answer lies in promoting the notion of "other-esteem," which is the respect, acceptance, caring, valuing, promotion, and forgiving of others without reservation. It discusses how people can move from being self-centered to thinking of others. The challenges to this are: (1) learning to accept the basic principle that the self alone is insufficient and incomplete; (2) re-examining and challenging our present prevailing attitudes, values, and beliefs; (3) listening to and learning from people of different perspectives; (4) understanding and believing that our own self-esteem is enhanced by the efforts and successes of any group or unit we belong to; and (5) sharing ourselves with others.
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Self-Esteem or Self-Delusion ?

By Philip O. Hwang, Ph.D.

Professor of Counseling - University of San Diego

Is there a dark side of self-esteem? Are there negative consequences to blindly promoting self-esteem? Is it self-esteem or self-delusion? Are we achieving what the proponents of self-esteem promised us?

Programs to raise self-esteem have not been able to demonstrate its' effectiveness. Neither has the promise of bringing up academic achievement through promoting self-esteem been fulfilled. Finally, as to reducing violence in criminals, these violent perpetrators have been found to possess high self-esteem. Is this the dark side of self-esteem?

For over two decades, different groups of the helping profession having been teaching and promoting self-esteem. This movement was given a big impetus in 1986, when the State of California established a special task force to Promote Self-Esteem and Personal and Social Responsibility. After almost four years of study and hearings, the task force concluded that low self-esteem is at the root of many social problems, such as crime and violence, drug and alcohol abuse, academic failure, chronic welfare dependency, child abuse and teenage pregnancy.

Since this report came out, the State of California and the entire nation have been caught up in greater frenzy of promoting self-esteem. Journals, magazines and newspapers all have published articles on the topic. A proliferation of television programs, educational organizations and political interests have jumped on this new bandwagon. It appears that many people claiming to be specialists or experts, are trying to teach self-esteem, including some with questionable motives. Many of these training manuals and books have promoted the "great benefits of self-esteem," without much critical research.

The last few years, more and more researchers, reviewers and authors have questioned the "real" benefits of self-esteem. Many are beginning to suggest that there may be a dark side of self-esteem. This overwhelmingly pervasive promotion and acquisition of self-esteem in American society is partly a result of biased and wishful thinking that simply refuses to acknowledge and accept that there is a darker side of self-esteem.

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
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The most definitive and exhaustive study belongs to Roy Baumeister, and Joseph Boden both of Case Western Reserve University, and Laura Smart of University of Virginia. In the January, 1996 issue of Journal of Psychological Review they wrote that people who engage in murder, rape, gangs, terrorism, etc., rarely suffer from low self-esteem. In fact, people with poor self-images are less violent and less aggressive than people with inflated egos.

They further point out that it is threatened egotism rather than low self-esteem that leads to violence. Moreover, certain forms of high self-esteem seem to increase one's propensity to violence. An uncritical endorsement of the cultural value of high self-esteem may therefore be counterproductive and even dangerous.

Martin Seligman in his book "The Optimistic Child" stated that the negative consequences of de-emphasizing others include: vandalism, violence, racial tensions, high divorce rates. Students' "well being," he continued, is best enhanced by pursuits that take attention away from self.

U.S. News & World Report in its June 17, 1996 issue devoted considerable time and expense to activities designed to raise public school students' self-esteem, despite the absence of evidence that improvement in self-esteem leads to better educational performance. This emphasis on self-esteem is misguided.

Thomas G. Moeller in the January, 1994 issue of Education Digest stated that research shows improved academic performance in children increases their self-esteem, although increased self-esteem does not improved academic performance. Hence, efforts to improve self-esteem in children are misplaced and should be replaced by efforts at improving academic performance.

Professor Mark R. Leary, of Wake Forest University, and a self-esteem proponent, called Baumeister's research a "wake-up call" for all in the helping professions and said it has convinced him that far too much has been made of the usefulness of self-esteem.

A Wake-Up Call

If the lack of self-esteem is not the root cause of many of our social problems, then what is? If the promotion of self-esteem is not the solution to all our wants and needs in society, then what it? Have we gone too far? Which direction should we now focus or refocus?

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It is, I believe, in the maintaining of a delicate balance between self-esteem and other-esteem. Webster Dictionary has hundreds of entries with the word "self" hyphenated: self-image, self-governing, self-sufficient, etc. Not a single word, however, is hyphenated with the word "other." Does this not tell us a lot about our culture? After all, language is a form of communication and a reflection of our society. This clearly indicates that we are truly obsessed with the self and not enough with others. Today, may I be so bold as to coin a new word for Mr. Webster: - **other-esteem**.

Other-esteem is the respect, acceptance, caring, valuing, promoting and forgiving of others, without reservation. It is not just kindness towards others. The practice of kindness towards others is admirable and this world can use more of it. Sometimes, however, acts of kindness come from personal guilt, reward anticipation, social pressures, a political hidden agenda and even a personal superiority complex.

Other-esteem starts with a state of mind. It is a mental attitude that truly accepts the equality of all people. It does not look down at others because they are less wealthy, less socially connected, from another neighborhood, or of a different skin color, gender or life style. In other words, other-esteem puts one equal to others-- not above others.

Next, other-esteem is a high degree of respect, understanding and tolerance of other people who may think, believe, feel and behave differently. It is not merely an altruistic demonstration of kindness or generosity towards those who are less fortunate than us. Other-esteem demands respect, acceptance and valuing without conditions. It is also a realization and acceptance that we live in an interdependent world, and that the interaction with and dependency on other human beings are not signs of weakness or inferiority. These behaviors are reflections of strength and a higher level of human functioning.

Every individual should possess a healthy balance of both self-esteem and other-esteem. A healthy level of self-esteem based on one's achievement and a high dose of other-esteem based on one's belief and practice of other's worth. The two are not diametrically opposed; in fact, they complement each other. Self is incomplete without the Other. Self is empty without the Other. Self is lonely without the Other.

There are different levels of other-esteem. These steps are not necessarily attained in progression. Various situations and circumstances in different personal relationships will dictate the appropriate response. We don't have to demand that one always acts at levels of Valuing and Promoting of Others. This is humanly impossible and unnecessary. When we decide to take the road to other-esteem, the most important point is to remember that it is not enough only to be nice to everybody. There is more to other-esteem than just being non-offensive. We must learn to climb the ladder of other-esteem.

Other-esteem makes one more humble than proud and more cooperative than competitive. We must recognize that our lives consist of a series of complex and interrelated intricate relationships. Our relationship and interactions with others spin out around us like a spider's web; our individual actions and words may have a far-reaching effect on others. The more we go out of our way to understand, respect and accept others, the better we will feel about ourselves and our self-worth. This mutual sharing and assistance are the best ways I know to increase and enhance our self-esteem too. We have learned self-esteem from life experiences; we can acquire other-esteem from similar life experiences. It is possible and necessary to change our perspective. Increasing our degree of other-esteem will complete the self, make the self whole.

We Are Who We Are Because Of Others

Leaders are leaders as long as there are followers. Generals are commanders only because there are soldiers to carry out their orders. The president of a company exists because there are employees who listen and who follow the company's policies, missions and visions. Furthermore the success of leaders of any organization or country relies on the quality achievements and dedicated services of their followers.

In our professional and personal lives we have different and specific roles to play: sometimes as the leader, sometimes as the follower. In whatever role we choose to play, there are always others who will take up different roles. We must learn how to interact with them. We cannot live by ourselves, nor are we personally complete without others. There is a feeling of emptiness. We are mutually dependent on each other, and all of us have a profound affect on the attitudes and behaviors of the people around us.

Doses of Other-Esteem

To counteract this distorted perception of life based on the goal of self-sufficiency, we need to acquire a healthy dose of other-esteem, a new attitude and practice towards life in relation with others:

1. Realize that life is not always a competitive win-lose game; through cooperation and sharing, everyone can achieve his goals and happiness.
2. Understand and accept that life is much more than just a competitive game to see who is better, richer, stronger, smarter and more successful. Life is about caring, sharing, relationships and happiness. One important point to remember is that money cannot buy happiness. Wealth, strength, intelligence and success do not guarantee satisfaction in life.
3. Because our lives are interwoven with the lives of other people through a complex network of relationships, our success or failure can affect many others. Thus, our choices and decisions should be made only after considering the implications and potential consequences to others.
4. The attainment of individual goals and social responsibilities can be balanced by encouraging and fostering the growth of other-esteem in American society.

As the concept of other-esteem takes root and spreads throughout society, people will begin to see more clearly that in the long run, most social objectives and individual goals do converge. Through an increased awareness of our interdependence with others, our horizons will expand to include not just ourselves but those around us. A quick survey of society yields many situations where other-esteem can bridge the gap between individual goals and social objectives. When violence in our streets is curtailed, we will regain our freedom to travel without fear. When burglary and robbery decrease, we will experience less violation of our rights to ownership. These changes will not happen without our belief in human interdependency, pervasive understanding, acceptance and respect for one another.

Future Challenge: Learn to See the World Anew

How do you go about moving from self to other? How do you maintain a balance of caring for self and yet at the same time show high esteem for others? The following are issues and challenges:

1. We must learn to accept the basic principle that the self alone is insufficient and incomplete. The self can fulfill and complete itself only through meaningful relationships with others.
2. It is essential that we re-examine and challenge our present prevailing attitudes, values and beliefs. We need to understand how we are the way we are and how we think, feel and act differently from others.

3. We need to listen and learn from people of different perspectives. Many of us have mastered the skill of talking. Now we must learn to master the art of listening.

4. All of us can change our focus from self to a balanced life that includes self and other. We have to understand and believe that our own self-esteem is enhanced by the efforts and successes of any group or unit we belong to: family, church, sports teams, school, company, city, country, etc. Learn from new life experiences to see life in a more balanced view of the self-other continuum.

5. Share yourself with others. There are people out there who need our support in so many different ways. Develop your own personal support system. We need others just as they need us.

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